# *Response by the Recipient of the Margaret E. Mahoney Award*

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It is a great honor to receive this award. More than anything else, the real treat was to hear all those kind words from Margaret Mahoney. Part of the tradition from which I like to identify myself as coming includes great uneasiness about responding to such compliments or praise, for fear of invoking one or another evil eye. I'm always embarrassed when anyone says anything nice, and given the scale of Margaret's remarks, I'm exponentially more embarrassed than usual. Fortunately, Margaret made reference to my mother, which permits me to slide into the one standard one-liner I've been able to use in such circumstances: I wish that my parents could have heard Margaret's remarks. My father would have enjoyed them. My mother would have believed them.

I also think the reference to my mother is appropriate, however. Many of you have had professional or social dealings with my mother at one point or another in the last number of years. As I look around the room, I see a lot of defendants. In fact, I don't think there's any institution with which I've ever had a professional association that she hasn't litigated with at one time or another.

My father, who died a number of years ago, taught me a most important lesson. He was born in 1920, at home. He spent his life representing working people and had extraordinary talent, extraordinary affection, and extraordinary insight for what real work and real life was like. I'd like to illustrate the latter by telling one of my favorite stories about him.

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When I was a graduate student at Ann Arbor, my mentor, who was a young faculty member and my dissertation chairman, was teaching a course—this was in 1971 or 1972—entitled, the "New Left." She wanted to begin the course with an initial lecture or two entitled, the "Old Left." Knowing something about my interests and my family background, she asked me if I would do the lecture. I started preparing, and spent a lot of time doing the research. I became focused on the following theory—which was really a reflection of Selig Perlman's still central work on the history of American working people—that what distinguished the working class in the United States from that of most European countries was exactly the extent to which it was divided by ethnicity and the extent to which, on the polar ethnic division of black and white, elites were able to promote that ethnic division to frustrate the development of community. I pursued that thesis by looking at the number of trades that were dominated by members of a particular ethnic group, in the United States and in New York City, around the turn of the century. There were some wonderful books on that. People thought stereotypically about the Jews in the needle trades and the Italians in construction; the cigar-making industry was dominated by Bohemians; parts of the fur industry that were not dominated by Jewish immigrants were dominated by Greeks, and so on and so forth. I made a list of all the occupations I could think of and then I made a list of all the ethnic groups with which they were primarily identified.

One evening, I called home from Ann Arbor. I was very happily telling my father about this and explaining to him why I had done it. I said, "But Dad, I have one question." I said, "I've been able to identify the carpenters, who were predominantly Irish, and the sheet-metal workers, who were primarily Germans, and so on and so forth, but I don't see the plumbers anywhere in terms of ethnic groups."

He didn't hesitate for a moment. He said, "Idiot!" He said, "You social scientists are so brilliant, you academics are so brilliant."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "It should be obvious."

I said, "Well, what do you mean?"

He said, "Where the hell are European peasants going to learn about plumbing?"

Plumbing, in fact, was the one native American trade. I have always tried to apply that lesson ever since.

I would like to say a few things in response to the very special and signal honor of being chosen for an award named for Margaret Mahoney.

At the same time, I'm supposed to talk about managed care and the managed-care revolution. In thinking about that, I thought about Margaret. There are at least three principles that she has maintained throughout her career and throughout all of her professional activities—and does to this day. Every time I've encountered her professionally, one or two or all three of them has emerged. They all can also teach us a lot about how to respond to managed care and the changes going on in the health system.

The first principle that I think all of us should learn from Margaret Mahoney is that there's no magic. There's a tendency on the part of some politicians and journalists to use labels as though they were solutions, to use phrases as though they meant content. In fact, most things in life that are of any value, that produce any benefit, take an extraordinary amount of hard work. That is not always availing, but in the absence of that kind of hard work the likelihood of good results is substantially diminished.

The notion that managed care is either inherently good or inherently evil is something that we should all have outgrown by this point. You can make many things work for beneficiaries, for providers, for the community, if you work at them the right way. Even the best ideas (not that I am sure I would put HIPCs in that category) won't work without sufficient attention to detail and paying attention to what you're about.

The second point that we've learned from Margaret, over and over again over the years, is that you can't reduce everything to numbers and formulas. That's not to say you shouldn't do research. She's always supported research and been an advocate for

it. It's not to say you shouldn't be better informed rather than less informed. It's not to say you should be ignorant about the most sophisticated forms of analysis. But it is to say that unless one has some real understanding of the nature of human institutions, of the nature of professional values, of the nature of professional standards of conduct, you're going to miss a large part of what's going on. You may have the appearance of change without any of the reality.

Frankly, if you listen to the rhetoric, I think this is one place where the managed-care community has fallen down very significantly. However much truth they embody, there is enormous public attachment to the notions of professional standards of physician conduct, of the role of physicians in society, of the particular role of professional independence and professional judgment and professional autonomy. These are not reducible to numbers and not reducible to formulas, and they are not effectively rebutted by showing data that suggest that in their absence you can produce better outcomes, or even produce people who give more positive answers on satisfaction questionnaires.

Getting into the fiber and texture of real human institutions and the values they embody and the values they represent is an often-overlooked part of our social discourse, and one that we have to figure out how to better incorporate in what we talk about. Margaret's never forgotten that. She has always reminded us that there's something more at work than just the numbers.

Finally, you have to keep your ears open for the dog that doesn't bark. It's the folks who are not at the table who define the character of the game. It's the people who aren't there who define the value or lack of value of what it is that people are doing. In the American health-care system in 1996, those are the people without any form of health insurance.

Much of our discussion of managed care, for example, increasingly ignores the growing number of our fellow citizens who have access to neither managed care nor unmanaged care. Much of our discussion about the future of the health-care system focuses on the part of the system that serves every day a smaller and smaller

proportion of all the illness and disease and suffering in this society.

Margaret would never let us forget that that's what the argument has to be about. Margaret would never let us forget that we haven't done our jobs until we've worried about that part of the problem. For precisely those reasons, it's with special pride that I'm pleased to be here today and pleased to accept an honor bearing her name.